

# Adverse Childhood Experiences

## Recognition and Response in 4-H Programming

### What are adverse childhood experiences?

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are stressful events that can include abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction.

### What was the ACEs Study?

The ACEs study was conducted by Drs. Robert Anda and Vincent Felitti in a collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and the Kaiser Foundation (Felitti et al., 1998). One of the key findings of the ACEs study was that the accumulation of ACEs is a key predictor of adulthood health issues.

### Examples of ACEs:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Household dysfunction such as:
  - Substance abuse
  - Mental illness
  - Battered mothers
  - Criminal behavior

### Why Understanding ACEs is Important

4-H programs are open to all youth, regardless of background. One takeaway from the ACEs study was that adverse childhood experiences potentially occur at all levels of society. Therefore, 4-H leaders should expect that at least some of their involved

youth are experiencing ACEs that may affect their participation in meaningful ways.

### Prevalence of ACEs

The ACEs study found that among the 17,000 participants in the study, two-thirds reported at least one ACE, and 20% of participants reported three or more ACEs. Coping with stressors requires an expenditure of energy; in children, this may interfere with their capacity to explore and master age-appropriate skills. Furthermore, prolonged activation of the stress response system (i.e., fight or flight response) has cognitive, emotional, and physical side effects (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

### Behavioral / Emotional Effects

The ACEs study uncovered a greater prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse, overeating, delinquent behavior, sexual promiscuity, and self-harm during adulthood among those who reported higher numbers of ACEs. The authors concluded that a variety of health issues that manifest in adulthood may have partial origins in negative experiences during childhood.

### Recognizing Signs of Overwhelming Stress

Although 4-H staff and faculty may not have access to the life histories of involved youth, there are some warning signs that indicate that youth are

managing an overwhelming amount of stress (Crosson-Tower, 2003):

- Disengagement
- New anxieties
- Expressions of unworthiness
- Increased deference
- Indecision
- Mood disorders
- Odd dress / appearance (representing a significant change from previous norms)

### **Resiliency within 4-H Programming**

Promoting resiliency among youth is where 4-H meets the issues of the ACEs study. By design, 4-H programming represents a process-focused strategy for promoting resiliency. According to Masten (2009), these strategies “build self-efficacy through a sequence of graduated mastery experiences that enable children to experience success and motivate them to succeed in life.” This description maps onto the curricular design of many 4-H projects, which often are developed in levels that include increasingly challenging activities for youth to complete.

In addition, 4-H Clubs ideally foster significant relationships between club members and caring adults. Studies have shown that a relationship with a caring adult acts as a buffer against the negative effects of childhood adversity (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

### **Strategies to Promote Safety**

Listening techniques are critical to promote a sense of safety in 4-H programming. When a child brings an issue to you, try to use phrases that are not emotionally loaded. Children are keenly aware of the emotional climate that adults create; this affects their desire to disclose sensitive information (Jensen,

Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005).

- Ask “what happened?” instead of “what’s wrong with you?”
- Use the child’s language – not sensational words.

Some children will not bring issues to their authority figures on their own. This may be an indicator that the child believes he or she may be blamed or feel worse for bringing problems to a caregiver (Gillath, Mikulincer, Fitzsimons, Shaver, Schachner, & Bargh, 2006). When conflict or difficulty arises for these children, leaders may notice some of the warning signs of stress named above. In these situations:

- Keep asking what has happened – you will get the “easy” answer first.
- Each child and person has their own threshold of when enough is enough.

There are also simple modifications to program design that can add to the sense of comfort and control for youth who may be experiencing greater adversity.

- Use appropriate icebreakers that avoid known triggers.
- Provide opportunities for youth to exercise control.
  - Youth can take a break when needed.
  - Youth can select their own project work.
- Choose certain activities that highlight youths’ existing strengths.
- Help children problem-solve logically.

These strategies maintain a level of predictability and control that may be absent in the home lives of children who face a great deal of adversity. Environments that are more orderly and predictable tend to be associated with fewer behavior and emotional problems in children (Dumas, Nissley, Nordstrom, Smith, Prinz & Levine, 2005).

A final consideration in the promotion of safety within 4-H program is *member retention*. For example, encouraging youth choice and flexibility in project work is a strategy that others have documented as a way to promote retention (Baney & Jones, 2013; Harder, Lamm, Lamm, Rose, & Rask, 2005). Through promoting retention, the non-family adult relationships and mastery experiences that are the backbone of youth resiliency have more time to potentially manifest their effects.

### **Policy and Procedure**

It is important to note that in most states, including Maryland (Code of Maryland § 07.02.07), educators and official UME volunteers are considered to be mandated reporters of child abuse. By creating a safe and welcoming environment within 4-H programming, it is possible that a youth who has experienced abuse may disclose to a trusted leader what has happened. It is *not* the leader's responsibility to provide counseling or intervention other than to ensure that the proper authorities are contacted per state law.

### **Conclusion**

4-H Clubs and the adults who organize them can play an important role in the overall functioning of children who are experiencing ACEs. ACEs are relatively common, but the research shows that there are ample

opportunities to mitigate their effects. The mastery experiences developed through 4-H project work and the caring relationships with non-family adults that develop over time are reliable predictors of resiliency among youth (Masten, 2009; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

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